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Making the Modern:

^ Twenty Five Years of the Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression

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According to the standard chronology, the little theatre movement in English-Canada had its origin with the founding of the Arts and Letters Club and became fully institutionalized with Hart House Theatre's establishment in 1919. A somewhat earlier organization, The Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression, has received little attention, although its dramatic work preceded that of the Arts and Letters Club by some ten years, and it had a fully formed programme of dramatic training and an active amateur troupe by 1908, the year the Club was initiated.¹ Neither the School nor its founder, Emma Scott Raff (later Nasmith) receive entries in the Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre, for example, and the reasons for this are illuminating as indices to the current construction of cultural histories, and, more specifically, to the distinction between "amateur" and "little" theatre which structures English-Canadian theatre history.²

The fact that the Margaret Eaton School was primarily a women's academy is one obvious reason for this omission; so, too, is the erroneous assumption that the School functioned merely as a finishing school for the otherwise undeployed daughters of the Toronto middle class. Similarly, the dividing line between the "amateur" and "little" is a gender gap; for amateur theatre in Toronto in the early years of this century rested on the efforts of women, while both the Arts and Letters Players and the Hart House Theatre were male-directed groups. Second, the fact that Emma Scott Raff was devoted to the art of elocution means her work can easily be seen as traditional; and while a number of statements document her dedication to new materials and techniques, concrete details of the productions have been lost.³ Thus the work of the Margaret Eaton School is

defined as amateur when experimentalism in plays and staging --and expressionism in particular -- is seen to differentiate serious theatrical activity from its amateur predecessor. A third reason is given by Anton Wagner in his introduction to The Developing Mosaic. For Wagner, at the beginning of the twentieth century English-Canada had "three opportunities of [sic] creating the basis for a national theatre and drama from a single privately subsidized and professionally directed little theatre institution in Toronto." However, "because the School was primarily an educational institution and did not engage native playwrights, it had little direct influence on the development of Canadian drama" in comparison to the Arts and Letters Club and Hart House (6). While Wagner notes the School's early role in propagating and performing the works of the Irish Literary Movement, he does not see the school as achieving prominence until Bertram Forsyth's brief tenure as director in the mid-1920s. The question of the School's influence, or lack of it, will be considered later; but for the moment it may be noted that, when the little theatre movement is defined as the stirrings of a national theatre, the School is disqualified by its reliance on classical, English, and European material.

Apart from the School history written by alumna Dorothy Jackson (who concentrates on its later development as a centre for women's sports and physical education), the only significant treatment of the Margaret Eaton School is given by Robert Scott in "A Study of Amateur Theatre in Toronto: 1900-1930." Scott traces the pivotal role played by Emma Scott Raff in the development of amateur theatre, particularly in the first decade of this century, and details the life of the School's Associate Players; the focus of Scott's topic means that the School's student productions and dramatic arts curriculum are necessarily omitted. However, the range of these activities is formidable. The School existed primarily as a dramatic and literary academy for the first twenty five of its more

than forty years; it attempted to offer the full-time women students an arts education equal to the university's and thorough professional training in several areas. Its discussion groups and public lectures provided both cultural uplift and challenge; the School undertook considerable outreach work; at its peak more than a thousand students enrolled annually for part-time instruction. Consideration of the full scope of the School's activities helps to provide a sense of its aesthetic, artistic and educational mission and its role in creating the preconditions for both the actors and audiences of the little theatre movement. Its contributions to the latter were both material and philosophical. For many years the Greek Theatre provided a base for Toronto theatrical groups, and many of the future participants in both the Hart House troupe and the Dominion Drama Festival were trained either through the School or in its Associate Players ("Mrs. Nasmith's" 2).⁴ More abstractly, the School's activities helped to generate that sense of the the "modern" through which the productions of the little theatre movement would be produced and received. (Intrinsic to this modernization was the assertion and creation of women's place in the theatrical world.)⁵ If the primary project of the Arts and Letters Club was, in Merrill Denison's words, "never to produce anything that had been done in Canada before" (quoted Benson and Connolly 45) and to provide works otherwise inaccessible to Canadians, this was a task also undertaken by Emma Scott Raff and acknowledged in her 1940 obituary:

She was the first publicly to read the new plays being published in Ireland by Yeats, Synge, Gregory and others, but she went to Ireland to meet the authors and see the plays done at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The first Irish plays produced in Canada were produced in the Margaret Eaton Theatre from the year 1908 onward. . . . She also introduced St. John Irvine, Masefield and many other new playwrights and poets to

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Toronto audiences. Many famous actors, lecturers and writers were guest speakers at the Margaret Eaton School. Among these were Yeats, E.H., Sir Johnstone Forbes Robertson, Mr. Willard, Earl Grey, Governor-General of Canada, who initiated the Earl Grey Dramatic Competitions; Sir Frank Benson, Ben Greet, Edith Wynne Matheson, Rann Kennedy, Lilian Braithwaite and many others. (Toronto Telegram Feb. 17, 1940)

The remarkable Emma Scott Raff was born in Waterdown and raised in Own²₄ e Sound, the daughter of a Methodist minister family. She later recalled the legacies left by her Irish parents: a fascination with language from her "silver-tongued" father and "certain psychic gifts" from her mother ("Canadian Women" 26). She was schooled at the Owen Sound Collegiate Institute and received some education, probably as an auditor, at both Victoria College and the University of Toronto; at the same time, she studied art with George Reid, either at his studio in the Arcade Building or in the classes he began in 1890 at the Central Ontario School of Art (later the Ontario College of Art).⁶ She then taught art in Colorado, marrying William Bryant Raff in 1894 and giving birth to a daughter, Dorothy. On the death of her husband in 1897, she returned briefly to Owen Sound, and then moved to Toronto to study with H.N. Shaw, head of the Toronto Conservatory's dramatic art department. She transferred to the Toronto College of Music when Shaw became its principal, and is listed as a fellow and thus graduate of the College (Toronto College Calendar 104). The chronology of these early years is difficult to trace, but in the late '90s and the first decade of the century she "took post graduate work at the Curry School of Expression in Boston and the Gower St. Academy in London. She also studied mimicry with the celebrated Herman Vizin [sic] in London, and pantomime with the greatest exponent of that art, Madame Canalazzi [sic]" (Telegram Feb.17, 1940). Other sources list her as having studied with the voice critic William Shakespeare,

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although the dates for this are uncertain (Calendar 1908-1909 23); at various points she attended lectures in Oxford and France, and learned some archaeology in Greece ("Canadian Women" 26). Travel would remain a life-long interest.

These sketchy facts permit some reconstruction of the artistic training she received -- unsystematic and eclectic, as was typical of women's education of the day, but mildly bohemian. At the time of her study with George Reid he was teaching in the "radical" style of Thomas Eakins with whom he had studied; this involved painting directly on the canvas without preliminary sketching (see Miller). She chose widely among university classes in dramatic literature, philosophy and psychology, and later recommended such a "pioneer" approach to education to other young women, who might be stifled through a general course ("Canadian Women" 26). The expressive and dramatic training she received from Shaw was a departure from the norms of the time, since he attempted to equip students for stage careers (Scott 1966: 37); she may have received some of her especial enthusiasm for Shakespeare from that teacher, who went on to present Shakespearean productions and to lecture on Shakespeare throughout the West (Arrell 496). She is listed in the Conservatory's record book as being examined in June of 1899 in "Junior Elocution" ("Registration Book" UTA A75-0014 box 1); the Conservatory stressed a "spiritual assimilation" of the text as integral to expression (Toronto Conservatory Announcement 7). The Conservatory relied in its expression and elocution courses on the textbooks of Samuel Curry (as Scott Raff herself would later do); and Emma Scott Raff appears to have been profoundly influenced by her time at his Boston school. ⁷

Samuel Silas Curry had studied elocution under such Delsartists as the Boston professor of oratory Lewis Monroe and the actor-impresario Steele MacKay; he then joined them as one of the movement's foremost proponents and incorporated a school based on Delsartist principles in 1888. His methods, a

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biographer notes, were "unique and notable": "instead of old-fashioned elocutionary parlor and platform tricks, they give the student possession of his own powers; they make the artistic only an enlightened natural, and so avoid the artificial and the laboured" ("Curry" 302). Curry's defense of elocution as an equal partner to the other arts, and the artistic vision of François Delsarte, were to inspire Emma Scott Raff throughout her career, and she would rely on the Curry School in hiring staff.⁸ In common with a number of other literary figures of the transition years -- Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman are two such authors -- she would find in symbolist art and drama an enactment of many principles complementary to Delsartism; thus Ibsen and Maeterlinck and Yeats assumed central importance to her teaching and recitative work.⁹

Supporting herself and her young daughter, Emma Scott Raff undertook the sort of literary and cultural piecework^{then} common to women, ~~in the transition years~~. The turn of the century found her teaching, both officially and through affiliation, at the Toronto Conservatory of Music and the Toronto College of Music, taking on private pupils, offering lectures on Ruskin and readings from Macbeth and Parsifal. She also provided voice training to the theological class at Victoria College, and lived in the college's Annesley Hall residence as its director of physical education for women (a position she was to hold, in addition to other duties, until early in 1913). Encouraged by Victoria's principal, the Rev. Nathan^{ae} Burwash -- a life-long friend of her father's -- Scott Raff opened a small studio in rooms over a bank at Yonge and Bloor in 1901.

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9 Little information is available for the five years of the school in its first incarnation, but what exists gives a picture of remarkable activity on the part of the school's founder. The fledgling^g School of Literature and Expression maintained connections to Victoria College, sharing both students and services: School students used Victoria's gymnasium and residence and co-ordinated their

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schedules with its Arts offerings, while Victoria women received elocutionary training at the School and participated in its discussion and dramatic groups (Jackson 7). While similarly structured to other schools of music and expression (such as the Toronto Conservatory), maintaining a small core of full-time students and a large general-interest enrolment, the Margaret Eaton School differed in its educational philosophy. It was distinguished, even in the early years, by its contextualization of expressive within literary study; further, Emma Scott Raff was at pains to differentiate her expressive training from the rote instruction in elocution characteristic of the times. The School differed, too, in its self-construal as an academic institution. University connections were nurtured as an important testimony to the School's seriousness of purpose; and Emma Scott Raff's eventual aim was to demand junior matriculation of all her entrants and to provide training and diplomas for those seeking careers.

The early years of the School show Emma Scott Raff engaged with equal energy in other artistic activity. By 1903 she was also offering classes to the Women's Literary Society at University College, and these were so well-attended that they formed the nucleus of a new Women's Dramatic Club. This organization was for a number of years the only theatrical group on the campus; more significantly, as Robert Scott writes, "it was one of the first university organizations on the continent linking a formal drama course with theatrical activities" (Scott 1968: 68). Originally formed to produce annual Shakespearean productions, and to present scenes and abridgements which took the form of "studies in dramatic art, without any stage scenery," the students quickly branched out: 1907 shows W.S. Gilbert's Pygmalion and Galatea with an original Greek dance to close the show (Torontonensis 1908 329); in the next year they and the Women's Literary Society followed Scott Raff's interests with a year of Celtic readings and study, culminating in a production of Yeats's The Hour Glass

(Scott 1968: 120). While her increasing duties at the School meant that Scott Raff's involvement was at times intermittent, as late as 1919 she was directing the Club's production of Barrie's Quality Street (Varsity Mar. 17, 1919). The School itself experienced a similar expansion, especially when the departure of H.N. Shaw deprived Toronto of a ~~popular~~^{busy} teacher; and by 1905 the small studio was unable to accommodate all the students wishing to enrol in the dramatic and physical culture courses and the equally-popular discussions groups on Shakespeare and Browning.¹⁰

The efforts of one student allowed the considerable expansion of the School. Margaret Beattie was raised in Woodstock Ontario (also to a Methodist family), and displayed the traditional accomplishments in music, fancy needlework and riding, winning ribbons for her bread at country fairs (Biography, typescript, Jan. 1956. E- F 229-8-0-280). But Margaret Beattie, as she confessed in later life, dreamed of becoming an actress: she also developed a deadly skill as mimic and a life-long love of poetry, and was noted by family members for her characterizations from Shakespeare and Dickens and her flair for memorization (Eaton 195). The exercise of her talents might have remained restricted had she not persuaded her husband -- a young dry goods salesman named Timothy Eaton -- that their business would prosper in Toronto. Eventually, leisure and money permitted Margaret Eaton to take lessons in elocution from Conservatory instructor Jessie Alexander (later Roberts), and to form an amateur drama circle (Toronto Daily Star March 20, 1933).¹¹ Her aspirations reawakened, she began to take classes in 1903 at the School at Yonge and Bloor.

This marked the beginnings of a life-long friendship strong enough to withstand philosophical and perhaps temperamental differences and a marked inequality in position. (Occasional friction would be caused by Emma Scott Raff's devotion to the drama as a form of expression, versus Margaret Eaton's interest

in theatrical activity.) Margaret Eaton "became herself the chief student in the school and one of the most enthusiastic actors in the theatre." As Arts and Letters Club founder Augustus Bridle wrote in her 1933 obituary:

The school became to her a sort of church. There she was able to bring to focus something which all her life had been a dream. She took part in many of the productions under the principalship of Mrs. Nasmith and an active interest in all the school's activities, even to the designing of costumes. She found a fresh interest in Shakespeare from helping to act his plays; also in Greek drama, something which more deeply than Shakespeare helped to explain the riddle of existence. (Toronto Daily Star March 20, 1933).

Scott Raff seems to have had a high opinion of her patron's dramatic powers: "If in early life she had studied dramatic art, I believe she would have been a second Ellen Terry. I have never heard any one [sic] read Shakespeare with greater simplicity, beauty of diction and rhythm" (quoted Toronto Globe March 20, 1933). But her primary contribution to theatre in Toronto was more concrete: for she persuaded Timothy Eaton to spend \$50 000 for the construction of proper facilities for the School, and she continued to fund its operating expenses -- largely teacher salaries -- from her own funds, to an amount that the balance sheets suggest could have been as great as \$35 000 (E 22-6, file 3).

Emma Scott Raff and Nathaniel Burwash chose a site on North Street (now Bay), in those days close to wooded areas; memories of Athens inspired the design Scott Raff suggested to the architect (probably W.R. Mead). After several uncomfortable months of classes in the schoolroom of a Baptist church, the Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression was opened in January, 1907. The building consisted of classrooms, a studio, and a theatre, of which one later reviewer was to observe: "The Greek stage is rather a handicap in the



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